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## Alvin Helmer of Lidgerwood: Germany, World War II

Alvin Helmer

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# PRISONER OF WAR

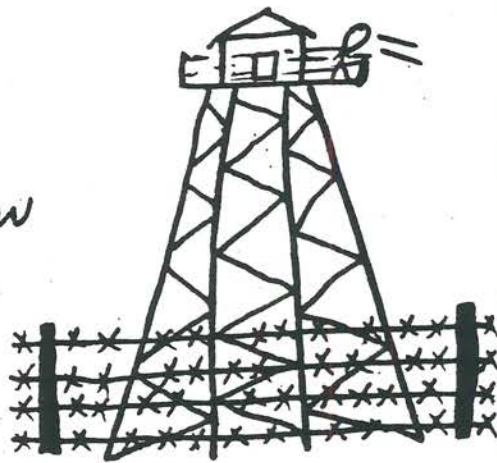
## A TRUE STORY

BY: ALVIN O. HELMER

LIDGERWOOD, N. DAK.

AMERICAN PRISONER IN EUROPEAN  
THEATER OF WAR  
GERMAN PRISON CAMPS  
WORLD WAR II 1941-1945

BOOKLET PREPARED IN  
COOPERATION WITH:  
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EX-PRISONER OF WAR QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name:

Current Address:

Alvin D. Helmer  
3 Ave S. E. #11 Ridgwood No. Oak

Address at time you went into service:

Same

Birthday:

April 17 1920

2. Family: (spouse and children)

Emily M. Helmer wife  
Scott G. Helmer son

3. Work and educational experience prior to going into service?

8<sup>th</sup> grade  
farm laborer then drove stock trailer for a trucking  
firm hauled to Fargo Stockyard

4. Dates and place of entry into service?

Ft. Snelling Minn. Nov - 18 - 1941

5. Summary of events from time of entry into service and until just prior to capture or entering status as a POW?

9 weeks basic at Ft. Knox Ky. 1st Armored Div.  
Left for overseas May 31-1942. Landed in Ireland  
Trained in Ireland + England before going  
to Africa in Dec. 1942. Drove trucks +  
Jeeps hauling supplies until captured  
Jan Feb. 14-1943

6. Unit, Country, time, area, weather, etc., at time event occurred which resulted in POW status?

1st Armored Div. Tunisia - captured  
while eating breakfast after being  
bombed

7. Describe military or other events that resulted in your POW status?

While engaged in battle they penetrated a weak spot along the line.

8. Following your capture, describe what happened. How many men were involved? Where did you go? How did you go? What type of personnel (military or civilian) took control of you?

about 200 men<sup>men</sup> German planes flew us to Staley - captured by African corps - we were loaded in boxcars very crowded - went to Staley 7A. We were made to dig trenches for a pipeline. Then shipped in boxcars to East Prussia where we were made to labor on farms. Then we were made to

9. Were you able to hide or escape? If so, tell what happened. Where did you hide? Food? Clothing? Water? Weather? Sleep? etc.

March to West Germany which took several months. We were held here until Germany surrendered

10. How did your escape end? Returned to U.S. control? Discovered by enemy?

11. Could you describe in sequence the various places you were interrogated and the methods of questioning the enemy used?

none

12. Did you have a weapon on yourself when you were captured? Did it effect your treatment?

32 calibre rifle.

no -

13. Were you at any time considered a civilian or an enemy spy or a wrong nationality? If so, how did this effect your treatment?

no

14. When captured or escaping, what clothing or equipment were you wearing? What changes did the enemy make in your clothing?

In uniform when captured  
Red Cross furnished change of clothing

15. What was your first food you received after your capture and what was your food from that date on?

Stew - potatoes - rhutobagas  
bread.

16. Did your nationality, religion, or race have a bearing on your treatment from the enemy?

no

17. What was your impression of your captors? Were they arrogant, considerate, professional, troubled, confused, anxious, etc.?

considerate

18. Were you alone or with others? How many? Same unit? Other units? Other services? Other nationalities, etc.?

*With other units - about 2000 men  
Mixed Nationalities*

19. At time of your capture, did you have higher or lower ranking persons with you? Did the difference in rank effect you?

*yes*

*no*

20. Following your capture, how did you feel about your family at home, and at what point or time did you feel they probably knew about your POW status?

21. When did you receive your first letter, package or information that your family knew of your capture?

*I recieved a letter  
about 6 months after being captured.*

22. In regards to your interrogation or questioning--was this conducted formally at a special camp or location? Did you have special or skilled interrogators? What did they want to know? How long were you there? Then where did you go?

*We were at the prison camp where  
interrogated by German officers. We  
werent questioned in length, but I'm  
sure the officers were.*

23. How did you feel the war was going when you were captured?

I felt this was a setback but had faith we would win in the end.

24. Did you think you would eventually get home?

yes

25. Did you have an opportunity to observe the enemy in combat, training, camp, or moving from one place to another?

No.

26. Did you suffer any injury at the time of your capture? What was done about your injury or illness following your capture?

I developed yellow jaundice while there but wasn't treated. Also my feet were frozen but no treatment provided.

27. At your permanent camp or camps, would you describe your conditions. Food? Living area? Beds? Food ration? Health? Water? Weather? Number of men? Guards? Size and location of camps? Organization in camp by enemy and by U.S. forces?

33 men in the barracks. Wire fence around camp - barred windows. Bunk beds with straw mattresses. Vegetable stew mostly with bread crust in sufficient portions. Red cross parcel every 2 weeks containing spam, candy bar, raisins, coffee. Good water to drink. Weather was comparable to N. Dak. worked on farms as laborer. Two guards to a barracks.

28. While in your permanent camp, did you know what was going on in the war? What did guards say about the ending of the war?

Some of the prisoners could read German and somehow acquired newspapers occasionally.

29. If you worked in camp or lived in work camps, please describe your daily transportation, work, food, punishment, etc.?

Our work camp was required to help with farm work which included hoing potatoes, milking cows & other farm work. We had to walk to get there. We were fed very simply.

30. Was your camp or camps ever bombed or damaged by the enemy or friendly military action?

No

31. Could you describe your roll call or counting procedure in camp?

Every morning they counted.

32. What type of guards did you have? Age? Rank? Weapons? Number? Service, etc.?

2 Middle age men - <sup>army</sup> Sergeants carrying rifles.



33. Could you describe your camp? Size? Fences? Guard towers? Latrine? Ration distribution? Hours? Lock-up? Heat? Recreation, etc.?

33 men - 8 beds in a room - table in the middle - camp surrounded by fence. Outside latrine used during the day. used a bucket during the night. up at 6 AM Lock-up at 8 PM in Barracks. Heated with wood stove. Played cards for recreation.

34. Could you describe the men close to you or the men you knew best? How did you get along with them?

had to get along  
We were all together  
for same reason

35. Could you tell about epidemics or sickness in camp? What were the medical facilities? How were you medically treated in camp?

If any of the prisoners were seriously ill they were taken by wagon to Aupenberg, Germany hospital. Otherwise there was no medical treatment.

36. Were any prisoners killed in camp or taken from camp and disappeared?

one prisoner was killed because his legs hurt so bad he couldn't walk & was shot for disobeying.

37. Could you describe the ration or food distribution system? How much? Fresh, canned, stale, dried, etc.? Local foods, Red Cross parcels, parcels from home, trade with guards or civilians?

Mostly foods grown on the work farm - plus Red Cross parcels. Traded candy or coffee to civilians in exchange for homemade bread or eggs.

38. Describe the type of work or responsibilities you were assigned within the camp from friendly or USA prisoners?

Keep barracks clean  
cooked meals part of the time

39. What were some of the things that kept you going while in camp? Your health? Age? Faith in U.S. Armed Forces? Religion? Family? Aid from other prisoners?

40. Did any prisoners become mentally sick or irrational in camp and were they removed?

*Not to my knowledge*

41. Did you have any secret radios, newspapers or outside news sources in camp from which you received information? What information did the enemy give you?

*Occasionally we would acquire a Newspaper or engage in conversation with Germans in exchange for cigarettes.*

42. Did you have any serious illness in camp?

*No.*

43. Did you have any riots in camp?

*No.*

44. How did you first know that war was coming to an end?

By the Peoples actions and they started to paint  
the roofs of the barracks and with P. O. W. on roofs  
and the russians moved in on one side & americans on other  
side

45. What were some of the tricks you played on guards?

none

46. What about escape procedures and methods used by you or others  
that you have knowledge of or direct information about?

none

47. Were you ever bombed by friendly or enemy aircraft?

once by americans

48. Describe any special train or ship trip you took while a prisoner?

none

49. When were you close to death or felt all was not worth living and you probably would die or be killed?

*no time*

50. Could you tell about any special religious observances by the enemy or special occurrence when they relaxed or tightened security rules?

*no*

51. Would you describe in detail any particular holiday, if observed, by enemy or prisoners, such as, New Years or Christmas.

*Just another day*

52. How did you feel about food in camp? How did enemy food agree with you? What was food? What were utensils? What did you make to eat with? Pots, pans, cups, plates?

*Pans*

53. Were you aware of any other American or Allied POW camps in your area? Civilian camps?

*yes*

54. In reference to your mind or yourself, how do you feel you held up in camp? Did you suffer periods of depression, crying, hysteria, headaches, loss of memory, etc.? How about the other men in camp? How do you feel you and others were able to live without nervous breakdowns?

*make the Best of it*

55. How do you feel other American POW's behaved or acted while in enemy hands? Please do not name an individual by name if you feel their behavior was not correct or up to the standards you set for yourself.

*the best way you could*

56. Towards the end of the war, what were first signs that the war was coming to an end in our favor?

*this is hard to explain it just happened*

57. How did the enemy guards or administrative personnel treat you towards the end of the war or when it was apparent the enemy would lose the war?

*no difference*

58. Could you describe how your POW status ended?

*no*

59. When or where did enemy guards leave? Did guards say or do anything at the end of the war?

*no*

60. What did the American staff at the camp do at the end of the war?

61. At the end of the war, where did you move? What was your food? Your health? Your morale?

*morale high*

*This is the best I could do after 40 yrs  
one forgets a lot  
thanks for waiting  
Alvin O. Helmer*

62. Could you describe some of the confusion that took place when you were liberated at the end of the war? Time, place, friendly or enemy forces involved, food, health, morale, POW discipline in camp, contact with U.S. military forces, etc.?

no

63. After liberation or the war ending, what happened? Did you move as an individual or group, go by foot, train, bus? Where did you go, to another U.S. camp?

We moved by jeep by truck we went to camp somewhere  
to France we guess then to States by ship  
Camp lucky strike camp in France

64. What happened at your camp prior to returning to the States? Did U.S. military officials interrogate you, examine you physically, give you food, clothing, etc.?

yes



65. How, when and where did you arrive back in the United States? Did you stay at some camp? Did you go home by train?

*We stayed in camp in New York then went by train home then to a camp in Arkansas*

66. What things today remind you of prison life in your day to day living?

*None to much*

*T.V. shows*

67. Do you have any complaints about how you have been treated since your POW days?

*No*

68. Do you have a picture of yourself prior to being a POW, preferably a picture in uniform? Do you have a picture of yourself following the war? Do you have a picture of yourself and your family recently taken, or taken within recent years? Any or all of these pictures would be appreciated. They will be returned to you after we have made copies of them.

69. Do you have any copies of telegrams from the War Department or the U.S. Government regarding your becoming a POW? Or your release, or war time status as a POW? These or copies of these would be appreciated. If you wish them returned, they will be sent back to you.

*Not that I recall*

70. Do you have any letters or copies of letters you sent home or received from home during war or during period you were a POW? These or copies of these would be appreciated. They also will be returned if you so indicate in your reply.

*no after 40 yrs they'd be hard to find*

71. A few POW's were able to return to the U.S. or home with a few articles they may have made, been given or in some way secured in POW camp. Some of these could be: paper notes, camp regulations, clothing, cigarette lighter, insignia, hand made pans or pots, special cans used in camp, small tools, etc. If you have any of these, we would appreciate a picture of them. If you desire they could be sent with this report and we will take a picture of them and return them to you if you so desire.

72. The above questions or suggestions are limited and you may write or explain many items not included; therefore, feel free to express yourself in any manner you desire.